

BEN ASHER OR BEN NAPHTALI:

A brief historical sketch of their textual histories

At times one must write out a few thoughts to clear away the debris of confusion in order that truthful claims may be presented. With this in mind, we want to trace out an idea that supports the primacy of the Ben Naphtali tradition of Hebrew texts as lately, manifested in the Ben Chayyim edition of the Rabbinic Bible of 1524/25.



“There is indeed no reason whatever why Ben Asher should be regarded as a better or more trustworthy Masoretic scholar than Ben Naphtali, except that Maimonides said so.” Stated by Norman H. Snaith in Jacob Ben Chajim Ibn Adonijah’s introduction to the Rabbinic Bible, Hebrew and English: with explanatory notes by Christian D. Ginsburg. Prologomena pg. XVIII

What is all the fuss about when it comes to textual criticism? This is a question that is routinely asked by laymen. Textual criticism, the scientific investigation of recovering relevant information about manuscripts, is no small undertaking, and involves the ascertaining of the provenance and historical transmission of ancient documents. Even so, these endeavors must and will continue. From classical texts such as Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey or Virgil’s Aeneid or other genuinely prized writings, handing these texts down through subsequent generations has entailed some difficult procedures. No less engaging a thought is the idea that biblical documents, likewise, have needed safeguarding from deceitful hands. Normally, when one considers the origins of Hebrew MSS, scattered thoughts arise. But truthfully, the histories of the Hebrew texts as they now stand are quite simple to trace and even easier to construct.

Basically, there are two main strands of texts in common usage today. One is called the Ben Chayyim—Ben Naphtali—set of manuscripts and the other is popularly known as the Ben Asher type texts. Each stream of manuscripts derives its name from a famed masoretic scholar of repute. A masorete was one whose mission was to establish the Hebrew Words of a text by utilizing one consonantal archetype, and then, later by vocalizing or adding points to each letter so as to preserve its proper reading. Different individuals were often employed in this work but, in the main, the masoretic scribe was without peer in this area of detailed and meticulous work. The masoretic as a unified group are often designated to have arose during the 6th to 8th centuries AD. There are no extant facts to verify this supposition, but it is the common one used by scholars today when describing the manner in which the Hebrew texts, as we know them now, have come down unto us. Masoretic are also, known

for their annotations in the margins of each scroll and their word lists, which, at times, have been appended to various books of the bible.

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Ben Naphtali (c.890-940AD) and Ben Asher (d.960AD), both of whom were renowned in their day for their scribal work on manuscripts lived in close proximity to one another. The two of them, hailing from families deeply committed to Hebrew textual matters, were situated in Tiberias. This city in the Galilee region had become the center of Jewish leadership and scholarship after Rome's conquest in the first century. As time progressed and rabbinical materials increased, disciples of learned men sought to preserve not only oral traditions, but also, the wording of the variant texts upon which their teachers expounded. Thus, after the Mishna & Tosefta supplement of the 3rd and 4th centuries, Palestine then found a rival center of rabbinicism toward the east in Babylon: Sura and Pumbedita becoming noted places of rabbinical authority.

Ben Naphtali and Ben Asher certainly distinguished themselves by their efforts in stabilizing the worded scrolls of their day. The acclaim accorded them is passed on to us primarily through two noted figures. Saadia Gaon, the greatest of rabbis during the gaonim period—a Ben Naphtali traditionist, and also, Maimonides, called the second Moses, who strictly adhered to the Ben Asher texts in the open and closed sections of each scroll. Saadia Gaon followed Ben Naphtali because of family heritage. Claiming relation to Hanania Ben Dosa, the first century wonder worker of Israel, his family stuck closely to the Ben Naphtali line of thought. Saadia's Arabic papers, along with his Hebrew exegetical texts—have been found among ancient Yemeni MSS—, and belong to a tradition that differs from common critical annotations published today.

Typically, students in a rabbinical center followed the traditions of their elders, which were passed on to them from their rabbi or instructor. My supposition is simple: *The renown, with which Saadia is given, far exceeds that which extends to the reputation of the Jewish Socrates, popularly known as Maimonides.* There is no dispute over their greatness in Jewish tradition, but, arguments abound as to what manuscript tradition is to be followed; Tiberias, being so central to the Hebrew critical scholarship debate. The issue today is whether or not the standard editions of the so-called Ben Asher text are the most accurate.

We now know that its history is obscure and scanty—it cannot be proven that a colophon ascribed to Shlomo Ben Boya'a or any other alleged Ben Asher text is genuine. The original Aleppo codex contained no authorial signature whatsoever. But this has not hindered its popularization among, both, the Church and academe. As the story goes: supposedly written in the 10th century in Tiberias, the Ben Asher scroll, then made its way to Jerusalem; and possibly, after Crusaders ransomed it off, it showed up in Egypt where Maimonides claims to have used it for reference when writing his opus, the Mishneh Torah.

Maimonides' statement of usage is the only reason that it possesses its fame today. In the end, it came to be located in Aleppo; there the Ben Asher text came to be known as Ha-Keter,--the Crown. With the establishment of the nation of Israel in 1948, riots broke out in the city of Aleppo and Muslims entering into the main Jewish synagogue, ransacked it, ripped and burned portions of 'The Crown.' Presently, all of Ha-Keter's Hebrew Scriptures are preserved except for the first five books, which are displaced.

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To clear away some of the fog, I am proposing another theory of manuscript tradition; one that substantiates Moshe Ben Naphtali's work. According to history, multitudes of disciples spread abroad from Tiberias carrying the traditions of their teachers. Our New Testament documents affirm this. Historical annals show that there were Jewish communities throughout the Roman Empire. Although these segments more than likely used Greek translations of the Old Testament, there were communities further east that still maintained an ability to read and write the Hebrew language. This is evidenced by notables who journeyed from as far away as Babylon and came to Israel to study and later to teach, Hillel is an example of this type. Babylon was known from the days of Jewish captivity as a place of Jewish learning. And this was not altered until the rise of Islam with its foundational belief of Arabic as the language of God-Allah, and the religion of Islam as Allah's revelation. Even then, many Geonim of the day wrote responsas against these new Islamic theories.

The use of Arabic and the spread of Islam, then led to the isolation, and dismantling of many Jewish communities; there had been many Jewish villages in the area now known as Saudi Arabia. Even further South in Yemen, Jewish communities continued to flourish. The Gulf region, with its connections to the areas surrounding Yemen through trade and inter-culturalization, continued the Babylonian traditions of Saadia Gaon. So, when Yemen permitted its Jews to return to Israel after 1948 the world learned of the preservation of their MSS, listened to how they had preserved an ancient Hebraic pronunciation that other communities had forsaken, and also discovered their strict adherence to the traditions of the Gaon, Saadia.

During the same period, but Westward in orientation, subsequent persecutions of Jews led to their Diaspora throughout the Mediterranean. Various centers became known, figuratively, as smaller conclaves of a Jerusalem tradition, as rabbis sought to instruct their followers in the ways of the ancients. By Medieval times, along with the rise of the Turkic-Jewish Khazar kingdom, Jewish refugees from Normandy unto Lithuania saw an increase in Judaism as a tradition. With some governments being tolerant and others not so tolerant, Jewish and Hebraic studies gained ground fast. These promotions would never have occurred apart from their cultural ties to Jewish MSS.

Sure, there was a time when MS disarray was the norm, but by the late Renaissance era, a man named Ben Chayyim Ibn Adonijah, using the Sephardic (Eastern) MSS of the day, critically compiled what he deemed as a true Masorah into one volume and this edition became the standard text of the Jewish community for over 450 years. This standard Hebrew text differs only slightly from the Ben Asher text, but, the Ben Chayyim of 1524/25 proceeded to be the one that was reverently used throughout the Ottoman Empire age.

It was only after WWI that the discovery of the Leningrad codex led to a push to override Saadia Gaon's textual stream for the one promulgated by Maimonides. So today, all critical text editions publish what is commonly called 'The Ben Asher' type text and usually degrade the Ben Chayyim tradition since it is considered non critical and not created along modern scientific lines. It does seem strange that today's critic raises textual questions which Jewish communities have systematically refused to entertain, citing them as valid.

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Reading the Old Testament in Hebrew does allow for exciting discoveries and the collation of materials gives insights that cannot be known apart from scientific inquiry. Comparison and contrast analyses are helpful in discerning minute discrepancies that may have crept into a MS tradition. But who would take the time to gather fragments and visit old museums around the world to study the texts? Few are afforded opportunities to see original editions these days. Even facsimile editions are hard to come by. Fortunately though, you can begin your search on line through various outlets and then you will be able to get a first hand glimpse at a few of the extant texts preserved worldwide.

1. The British Museum carries OR. 2375-a, a Yemenite MS containing the Hagiographa (c. 1460-1480). A late MS, but one with no variational differences from the earliest MSS recorded. The Yemeni Jewish community went to great pains to ensure that their MSS retained their authentic flavor. Often under duress, the Jews of Yemen survived the hostile environment of Islam in order to shield its faith from a general apostasy, which might have resulted from variegated text usage. Their manner of scribal copy and the rules to which they clung have become examples to all.
2. In the Taylor Schechter edition of the Cairo Geniza there is a text of a sermon of St. Augustine {T-S AS 139.1}. It is a palimpsest with Augustine's Latin in the background and the Hebrew scribe's new word list in the foreground. Dated to about the 6th century. It gives insight into Jewish usages of old scraps, even if Christian writings were contained therein. Of utmost importance are the Hebrew notes, dated by the Geniza unit to about the 8th century AD. Therein are notes on I Samuel 9 that are in accordance with the Ben Chayyim notes of the 1524/25 edition of the Hebrew text rather than with the Ben Asher line of materials.

3. The Geniza unit also contains an extant letter written by a man named Joshua in Israel to a rabbi in Egypt requesting permission to move to another town since the Crusaders were coming with a fury. Of note is the scripture in the first line (Ps 138:6). This letter is dated to the year 1099 and is relatively old. In the Ben Asher MS and in the Ben Naphtali MS the consonantal construction is exactly the same. This shows a virtual similarity in texts at an early stage prior to the divisionist era. At which time the 'cut and paste' scribe becomes prominent.

All in all, this debate will continue to rage. Textual critics have much at stake in terms of scholarship. Without the ability to innovate, there would be constant regurgitations of the old and never a time for resettling things new. For the person of faith it is a matter of inspiration, namely, what words do you believe have been preserved by God? It is possible to adhere to preservationism and still interact with critical scholarship, but one does need a mind that is unafraid to venture into new territories. Excursions of this type do quicken the intellect.



Ben Chayyim's text represents the critical and popular text copied by all throughout the ages. Far from being a conflated manuscript, it adheres to those MSS, which the whole of Jewry recognized as coming from the mouth of God. So even though I contend that the Moshe Ben Naphtali stream of texts is more accurate than the Aharon Ben Asher MSS, I am singling out Ben Chayyim's editorial labors as unique. His masoretic work was judicious, professional and based upon MSS from various places around the world, which suggests that he was able to produce an accurate multi-sectarian bible based on apographs which appropriately reflected the words of the autographs.

In a strict collation of the Hebrew text of the rabbinic bible of 1524/25—Letteris edition—and the Jerusalem Crown edition of Hebrew university, which is based upon the Aleppo text, a variety of similar features can be noted. In an examination of the book of 'Obadiah' in both editions, it may be confirmed that the texts are exactly the same. The vowelings, accents, open and closed sections in the verses are 100% alike. The 21 verses in Obadiah are roughly comprised of 289 words. To contrast each letter and its pointing takes a great deal of time but is rewarding for the textual editor. Although there is general agreement in this aspect of the editions there are other areas where differences abound. So we find in Genesis 48:19 a letter-*lamed*- without a daghesh, but in the Ben Asher Jerusalem Crown MS, the lamed is pointed with a daghesh.

These arguments seem juvenile and trivial to the reader who is unconcerned about such matters but from a religious standpoint they are all the more important. Few laymen will take the time to read behind the assertions made by scholars from every corner of the world so from time to time someone must reach for the baton and race alongside these modern theories to see if they are

as fit as advertised. Israel Yeivin, writing in his Introduction to the Tiberian Masorah, says of the Ben Chayyim edition, *“It has now been shown however, that although this edition is quite close to the original Ben Asher tradition, it in fact represents a mixture of traditions derived from a few MSS written not long before the edition was printed.”* Now here we have pointedly fallacious statements flung about. First of all, there is no record of the MSS used by Ben Chayyim, and his conclusion differs from what Ben Chayyim says in his own Hebrew *Introduction to the Rabbinic Bible* concerning how he compiled the notes for and issued the rabbinic bible of 1524/25

Secondly, it has not been demonstrated in any volume that it represents multiple diverse traditions and no one is able to identify these traditions exactly. However, we do know the types of Sephardic MSS that emerged out of the Jewish revival of the 12th centuries which gave us the exegetical writings of Rashi and Rambam. We have more authentic MSS from this period with colophons than from any other period. By setting aside the traditional text of the Jewish people, gentiles have been able to supposedly reconstruct what they believe to be the original text of Hebrew scripture, filling up a critical apparatus with emendations repudiated by Jews and Christians to this day; the un-pointed liturgical scrolls used in synagogues today is still the Ben Chayyim edition of scripture. Few rabbis would dare defile the sanctuary under their charge with man’s theoretical errors. It would not be kosher.

If we look backward in time to the paleo-hebrew script and its sibling, the cuneiform, a few observations can be made: the kind of which are necessary to understanding differences in ancient writing and other syllabaries. I am not of the opinion that vowel constructions of the past are readily understood by some of today’s scholars. There is no certainty that all of their conjectures are anywhere near the target, but, progress has been made. For Hebrew, what is often misunderstood is the manner in which the language has descended upon us. There are no ancient documents with vowelings as we are familiar with; though vowels would certainly be needed for general comprehension. The state of Hebrew syntax was as confusing as Greek majuscule scripts without spaces between letters. The reason that pointing, accents and vowels differed at times was because there were no standard Semitic dictionaries. The same word pronounced in different places might be pointed differently according to the usage of the community.

We have the same problem in the Greek MSS of old. Often accused of conflicting with one another hundreds of thousands of times, many have come to believe that the New Testament MSS are full of errors. What is not told to the savvy student is that of all the variations, 97% of them are related to spelling differences. Without standardized books, lexicons and dictionaries how else could one maintain unity in a text? Therefore, individual communities preserved their own readings throughout ancient times. Wherefore we should give much more attention to the consonantal clusters embedded in each type of script.

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A FEW ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

In the general quest for more information concerning the genealogies of various MSS, very little attention has been given to a systematic and detailed study of MSS which contain Mishnaic and Talmudic materials, all of which contain small sections which cover the Chumash, of first five books of the Hebrew Old Testament. The neglect of this treasured corpus has credited to our generation an incalculable amount of damage.

The Golden Age of Spain, in the thirteenth century, gave us great Jewish Talmudists who composed often and under less than desirable conditions. Nevertheless, their texts are nice exemplars of the standard editions (traditions) current in their day. The Rif—Rabbeinu Yitzchak ben Yaakov Alfasi (1013-1103), The Ritva—Rabbeinu Yom Tov ben Avraham Asevilli (1250-1330), along with the The Ran—Rabbeinu Nissim ben Reuven (1320-1380), are excellent places to begin digging.

The unfortunate manner in which these texts are laid out makes it virtually impossible for the average reader to penetrate the texts and make sense out of the difficult script and it's intricate and intertwined sentences, but the textual fruit derived makes the effort well worth the painful trials. Hebrew is recognized by its speakers to be a very precise language, the kind of tongue which shades each individual word with multiple colorful meanings.

There is a word for *exile* in Hebrew and it is the word *golah*. Of course, exile certainly speaks of one's

displacement from an area into a remote and uneasy circumstance. However, the simple change of a letter—an addition of an aleph—draws out an altogether different definition: *Redemption, geulah*. In Hebrew thought restoration forms the main premise of the Hebraic term *geulah*. It is to return a person or thing to its proper place, safeguarding and safekeeping it in the process.

In a real sense exile has become the tragically sad state of many of these Gold Age manuscripts. They have been set aside, displaced from the conscience of textual scholars today. And in their place a substitution has gained in currency among the supposed elite. Yet it is still possible for a general redemption to occur. Some persons of renown and repute will need to be willing to pay an awful price, through sacrifices of time, energy and monies, to rescue these now defunct MSS from the dusty basements of museums and the lightly esteemed genizas of the modern world.

Today, so much rapt attention has been accorded the theories of the value and histories of The Dead Sea Scrolls that the MS voices of the Gemara of the Golden Age are silent to our ears and we are the poorer because of it.

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